

The ashes of catholicism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Angela's Ashes is an absorbing memoir by Frank McCourt, a book that details his early childhood in Brooklyn, New York. However, it tends to focus more on his life in Limerick, Ireland through various anecdotes concerning the author's young life. McCourt presents the novel as a sort of coming of age story during his childhood. As McCourt himself recounts, "When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was of course, a miserable childhood. . . . Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood" (Mccourt 11). In Angela's Ashes, the Catholic Church plays a major role for Frank by influencing his actions, his fears, and his way of life. As becomes clear from a reader's standpoint, Frank's actions had been heavily influenced by the Catholic Church.

As a young man (pre-communion), Frankie found that his influences fell within what he had been taught, through confirmation specifically. However ready he may have been, he had last-minute jitters pre and post communion. As referenced in Duffy's article on Frank McCourt and religiosity, "That book's hilarious and irreverent chapter on Mr. McCourt's preparation for, and eventual ill-fated reception of, First Communion set down for all history what it was like to sit before an old Irish "master," named Mr. Benson in this case, and have very pre-Vatican II lessons pummeled (literally) into your pre-teenage brain" (Duffy 1). Whilst in America, the reach of the Church had vast differences, as the separation of Church and State had been written within the constitution. To long-time inhabitants of Ireland, the idea that Catholicism wasn't mandatory appalled them. "There is a picture on the wall by the range of a man with long brown hair and sad eyes.

He is pointing to his chest where there is a big heart with flames coming out of it. Mam tell us, That's the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and I want to know why the man's heart is on fire and why doesn't He throw water on it?" (McCourt 57). This statement startled Grandma, " Don't these children know anything about their religion? Mam tells her it's different in America. Grandma says the Sacred Heart is everywhere and there's no excuse for that kind of ignorance" (McCourt 57). Religion, as it had been taught to Frank, seemed authoritarian and rigid, filled thoroughly with " thou shalt not".

While reading, one gets the impression that the learner within Frank sees traditional religion as demeaning and burdensome. He'd been taught in the ways of strict ruler-to-wrist Catholicism, " You're not to be asking questions. There are too many people wandering the world and asking questions and that's what has us in the state we're in and if I find any boy in this class asking questions I won't be responsible for what happens" (McCourt 118). Teachings of the church permeated these boy's actions as well as influenced what their fears in daily life. Specifically for Frank, he frequented the confessional booth, to such an extent and for such minor infractions and afflictions that the father laughed at him. One of these occasions preceded Frank's thoughts, " every time I pass the graveyard I feel the sin growing in me like an abscess and if I don't go to confession soon I'll be nothing but an abscess riding around on bicycle with people pointing and telling each other, there he is, Frankie McCourt, the dirty thing that sent Theresa Carmody to hell" (McCourt 329). In his experiences, his most afflicting one lied with Theresa Carmody (both literally and figuratively) where he was sure he'd set her path to hell by having sex with her. It ate at his consciousness, making

his soul and morals unsteady, begging him to go to confession so God wouldn't hate him.

A major proponent of the fears instilled in Frankie could be the teachings of the priests: for example, the lesson on masturbation. The priests blamed the weeping of the Virgin Mary on “ the horror [of] Limerick boys defiling themselves, polluting themselves, interfering with themselves, abusing themselves, soiling their young bodies” (McCourt 292). The threats upon their actions had been said to inspire the devil to take them to hell, and that every time the boys “ interfere with [themselves]” that they step closer and closer to hell (McCourt 292). Frank felt tormented with possibilities, many alternate visions of how hell may be, “ Doom. That's the favorite word of every priest in Limerick” (McCourt 299) to try a few, fiery and painful with devils chasing and bearing pitchforks. Though these views seemed unlikely and ultimately pointless, they were a driving force in Frank's Actions as a young man (McCourt 299). Frank's life became impacted largely by the forceful nature of the Catholic religion. For example, a common idea expressed often in the days of confirmation, “ You're here to learn the catechism and do what you're told” however this was unlike what Frank had been used to, because to have religion taught in this way had previously been heard of (McCourt 118). Different from who it should have been, the Church played the authoritarian father figure in young Frankie's life.

When the church's representatives taught about adultery, they tried to make the students feel bad, saying, “ The Virgin Mary turns her face away and weeps” at the sight of adultery. Adultery is defined as “ impure thoughts and actions” so that the students feel guilty whenever these thoughts occur. An

example of this guilt that Frank feels could be after the death of Theresa Carmody, Frank feels that his actions sent Theresa to hell, and Frank tries desperately to save her soul. He attends four masses, prays at every statue, fasts, and uses rosaries in begging God to have mercy on the soul of Theresa Carmody. This guilt can be seen even clearer in Frank's plea, "How can a priest give absolution to someone like me?" The authoritarian role of religion imposed guilt on Frank, causing him to feel doomed to hell. With all these afflictions tearing at his soul, one priest appeased him, "He tells me God forgives me and I must forgive myself, that God loves me and I must love myself for only when you love God in yourself can you love all God's creatures" (McCourt 292). Against what he'd been used to, the church hadn't always been a safe haven for him. Three times in his life a father denied him access to the sanctuary, and this had a profound effect on his well-being. When his father takes him to be an altar boy, Frankie gets turned away thanks to the financial state of his family. "Delia says something has to be done about Angela and those children for they are a disgrace, so they are, enough to make you ashamed to be related. A letter has to be written to Angela's mother" (McCourt 45). Later, when Frank attempts to apply to secondary school, the door gets slammed in his face due to his appearance. Regardless of his relatively high intelligence, he gets denied any of the luxuries of a better life, thanks to how little money he had.

Frank's life had been impacted largely by the forceful nature of the Catholic religion. Religion, understood as personified, served as a father figure and a leader in Frank's childhood. Even though certain negative factors upset him,

Frank found other aspects of faith that provided a certain safe haven and hope.

Works Cited

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